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SUBJECT: OUTREACH TO JORDANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS

REF: STATE 88465

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DAVID HALE FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (SBU) Seven Jordanian activists representing human rights and civil society organizations gathered at the Ambassador's residence on June 3 for a discussion with the Ambassador, USAID Mission Director and Embassy officers. Copies of the President's June 5 Prague speech were distributed. The Ambassador reassured the guests that the U.S. remains committed to the democracy and human rights agenda. He invited the guests to comment, and ask questions, and other ideas on how we could promote the Freedom Agenda in Jordan. They had much to say. The two main themes were (a) concern that progress in Jordan on the road to democracy is diminishing, and (b) criticism of the manner in which the USG goes about assisting civil society, namely perceived underutilization of local NGOs, as opposed to U.S.-based ones.

¶2. (C) Several guests expressed impatience with the speed of reform. One spoke of a general climate of skepticism about civil society in Jordan. She alleged that the Ministries of Social Development and Political Development, aided by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, are using this climate to tie the hands of activists. In the view of several attendees, civil society activists feel a tension in the air that they had not encountered before in their dealings with the GOJ officials. There have been hints on the part of officials, one interlocutor reported, that democracy activism is a form of treason. She also said that Jordan's official Petra news agency told her human rights group that they would no longer print "NGO news." Several guests said that it has become difficult to schedule meetings with ministers. One spoke of a "chain of retrenchments," pointing to new regulations allegedly limiting the operating environment of civil society organizations and their foreign partners.

¶3. (C) Others also made reference to these new regulations, which were adopted by the Council of Ministers in late April, 2007, and became effective May 1. The regulations pertain to legislation governing how not-for-profit entities registered by the Ministry of Trade and Industry may operate in Jordan. These entities have one year to comply with the new regulations. NOTE: This would affect an estimated 30 NGOs working in the democracy field in Jordan. END NOTE. Some of the new regulations - those requiring NGOs to be audited and submit periodic reports - are not controversial. What troubles the activists is the regulation requiring not-for-profit organizations to get approval from the Council of Ministers prior to receiving funds from a foreign source. One activist expressed concern that the new regulation "will ruin everything." Several NGOs, led by Partners-Jordan, have written to and requested a meeting with the Prime Minister to lobby for amendments to language and procedures in the new regulations. One complaint from these activists is that they

were never consulted by the government before the regulations were adopted.

¶4. (C) The activists offered several explanations for what they were witnessing. One traced it to official embarrassment: American human rights reports that criticized aspects of Jordan's record were in large part based on information gathered by local organizations. The authorities, speculation went, were angered by the negative picture of Jordan that these organizations were helping to create. Another opined that the Ministry of Planning wants to direct foreign funds to "royal NGOs." Comment: There are many NGOs in Jordan patronized by various members of the royal family. End Comment. There was recognition that the GOJ has legitimate security and financial oversight concerns. At the same time, our interlocutors sharply criticized the perceived broad-brush clamp-down, and suspect that security is not the real reason for the government's new approach of keeping civil society at arm's length.

¶5. (C) The other focus of concern for these civil society leaders was their view of mechanisms for U.S. assistance. The American political party institutes, IRI and NDI, and implementers such as Freedom House and SUNY were perceived as not sharing their USG-provided largesse with local NGOs, and by our most outspoken guest, as not being as qualified as local organizations to provide assistance to Jordanian candidates in the run-up to municipal and parliamentary elections later this year. Several recipients of MEPI and USAID grants expressed unhappiness at (and clearly exaggerated about) having to write "150-page proposals" and "100-page interim reports." A recently returned Leaders-for-Democracy Fellow felt that the USG needs to be more selective to whom it awards grants, and avoid semi-official entities and nominees without a genuine commitment to democracy and human rights activism.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador welcomed the dialogue, and agreed specifically to a proposal for civil society representatives to sit down with USAID and Embassy officers to discuss the priorities for the coming year. He explained the different forms in which U.S. assistance comes, and assured the activists that this assistance will be used for its intended purposes. It was agreed that the Embassy should meet with the activists more regularly. With regard to their unhappiness with their own government's actions, the Ambassador assured them that he continues to receive assurances at the highest level that there is strong support to proceed with the reform agenda, but will raise these issues in his regular contacts.

¶7. (SBU) In addition to bringing this group together every three or four months, the Embassy and USAID will develop a strategy to address their misunderstandings about USG assistance.

¶8. (U) On July 4 and 5, three of the four largest circulation newspapers ran an Op-Ed piece by the Ambassador entitled "Celebrating Freedom Throughout The World." It was based largely on the President's June 5 Prague address. The Op-Ed quoted from the Prague speech and emphasized that freedom and democracy are universal desires, not ideologies imposed by the West. It further stressed that the United States remains very committed to promoting human rights and democracy around the world.

¶9. (C) Comment: Gripping about the paperwork requirements of our grant-making and -monitoring process is common, although always worthy of review to see if procedures can be simplified. Of greater concern was the consensus description of negative atmospherics in their relations with the government in recent months, perhaps associated with increased GOJ anxieties about civil society activism in light of upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections. This is an area the Embassy will focus on improving.
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